DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 444 054 CG 030 149

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TITLE Connecting Career Development and Public Policy with Counselling Process Issues.
PUB DATE 2000-03-00
NOTE 14p.; In: Making Waves: Career Development and Public Policy. International Symposium 1999 Papers, Proceedings, and Strategies (Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, May 2-4, 1999); see CG 030 145.
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Career Counseling; Career Development; Creativity; *Employment; Foreign Countries; *Human Dignity; Human Resources; Job Training; Problem Solving; *Public Policy; Unemployment
IDENTIFIERS *Canada; Problem Identification

ABSTRACT

The development of effective public policy regarding career counseling requires a close connection with counseling process issues. This paper focuses on three aspects of the counseling process which have major implications for policy: (1) problem definition; (2) the dignity of the person; and (3) the importance of imagination, creativity, and flexibility. In considering the problem, the Human Resources Development Canada describes four areas where clients need assistance. The first, career exploration and decision making, is where clients address issues related to self- and occupational understanding and career decision making. The second, occupational skill development, concerns client skill level. The third, employability, focuses on job search techniques. The fourth, job maintenance, focuses on the skills clients need to maintain employment and function smoothly in the existing job market. There is a certain vulnerability that comes with unemployment and, therefore, a need to focus on affirmation efforts. In pursuing this goal the uniqueness of each person must be respected. Affirmation can come from many different sources, such as family and friends, support groups, and employment counselors. Within the context of social and economic upheaval it is difficult for clients and counselors to rely on many of the traditional methods of planning and decision making. This results in an acute need for flexibility and creative problem-solving methods. It is to this end that career policy and practice must be directed. (Contains 28 references.) (JDM)

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By

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5. CONNECTING CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND PUBLIC POLICY WITH COUNSELLING PROCESS ISSUES

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The development of effective public policy regarding career counselling requires a close connection with counselling process issues. The two domains must go hand in hand. The focus of this paper is on three aspects of counselling process, which have major implications for policy: problem definition, the dignity of the person, and the importance of imagination, creativity and flexibility.

Problem Definition

Consider the following situation. A person is standing under a streetlight looking for missing car keys. A passer-by asks if the person is sure the keys were lost under that streetlight. The person replies: "No, but the light is better here."

Sometimes, defining career problems is a bit like looking for lost keys. We search in areas where we feel comfortable and have some expertise, that is, where the light is already on. We are less comfortable moving into areas of darkness. Perhaps we need to revise the metaphor to allow ourselves more freedom. A more portable source, such as a flashlight, might serve us better than a fixed streetlight. Perhaps the starting point should be where we think we lost the keys rather than where the light is located. Also, there are other factors, such as using systematic search methods and support from others. Metaphors have a way of capturing information in a form that lends itself to creative problem solving.

An international project in which I was involved illustrates how the above metaphor can be used to examine a problem. A large number of coal miners were suddenly unemployed. They had lived their lives with government assurances of job security. Suddenly, they were left with few economic prospects and minimal education. As government officials came to terms with this situation, they became aware of the need for some kind of career counselling assistance for the miners. Program planners focussed their efforts on the development of a job information bank, computer assessment programs and testing — all familiar activities (under the streetlight) reflecting the expertise of the planners. No one took time to talk to the miners. It would have made sense to direct more initial efforts toward understanding the life stories of the miners and to work with them in developing appropriate intervention strategies. The situation is not uncommon, and while not a lot of harm is being done through this type of approach, I am not sure the real problems are being addressed. We often

retreat from difficult situations to "comfort zones" that reflect what we have to offer, rather than opening ourselves up to complex problems reflecting client needs. Part of the difficulty is often a desire to "do something" before we have fully understood the problem.

Let me turn to the Canadian context now and explore how employment problems have been defined. Human Resources Development Canada describes four areas in which clients typically need assistance (Schulz, 1996). The first — career exploration and decision making — is where clients address issues related to self- and occupational understanding, and career decision making. The second — occupational or generic skill development — concerns client skill level, and the typical intervention involves some form of training or educational program. The third — employability dimension — focusses on job search techniques. The assumption here is that clients may have clear occupational goals and the necessary skills, but they still may require some specific information and training in job search strategies. The fourth—employability dimension, job maintenance—focusses on the skills clients need to maintain employment and function smoothly in the existing job market.

The employability dimensions have helped counsellors define counselling needs, but there are three further questions that need to be posed. The first concerns the degree of overlap within the employability dimensions. In an ideal world, people might proceed in a straightforward fashion through the employability dimensions. Life, however, is more complex, and there are many times when clients may need to address more than one dimension at the same time. I have observed many employment counsellors who use this system with considerable flexibility. It is not uncommon to see clients working on more than one dimension at the same time or to see movement back and forth from one dimension to another as clients proceed through the counselling process.

The second question addresses the comprehensiveness of the four employability dimensions. They certainly address some major career issues, but there is a need for an addition that addresses personal issues. For example, personal issues, such as drug or alcohol addiction or day care problems, can limit a client's ability to proceed with the usual career intervention activities. These personal problems need to have some place within the career definition framework. *Starting Points* (Westwood et al., 1994) is a needs assessment program that attempts to address some of these issues. The program is based on the notion of taking a trip, and the employability dimensions are described as roadblocks and stopovers that one might encounter along the way. The program has been revised to build in an additional roadblock and stopover that takes account of personal readiness (Borgen and Amundson, 1996). Conceptualizing the employability dimensions in this fashion is consistent with the observations by Herr (1997)

about the need to extend traditional career counselling boundaries to include personal issues.

The third question concerns who has the power to define the counselling issues. In some instances, there is considerable disparity between what counsellors and clients perceive to be the issue. For example, some clients want support for a particular training program, when there is little justification for their choice. Through *Starting Points*, we have found it helpful to begin with client perceptions, then move on to building self-esteem and to gathering information. With this foundation in place, goals can change, and there is a greater likelihood of client and counsellor unanimity (Borgen, in press).

A final challenge concerns defining career counselling problems at a time when futurists such as Rifkin (1995) and Bridges (1994) are questioning the nature and availability of jobs. To illustrate, I am working with a colleague on a research project based in Newfoundland involving people in the fishing industry. In this context, many people are facing the stark reality of more than just the loss of a job; it is also the loss of a way of life. For most older workers, employment prospects are very limited. How do career development and policy initiatives fit within this challenging context? Perhaps it is time to move beyond the narrow confines of a job and consider broader issues such as self-worth and the need to make meaning in one's life. With this expanded definition of the problem, the scope of relevant interventions shifts considerably from traditional career counselling practice.

The importance of attaining the client perspective when defining problems has been a prevailing theme in this section. This orientation is consistent with a client-centred view of helping. Next, I address the client-centred focus more directly and examine both client needs and the nature of counselling roles.

Affirming the Dignity of the Person

The significance of clients in employment counselling is affirmed in policy by departments such as Human Resources Development Canada. A client-centred approach (Schulz, 1996) is the foundation of employment counselling, thus affirming the dignity of the person. However, many counselling policies undermine the principle of client affirmation, and incorporating this principle into counselling practice can be challenging. For example, many counsellors find themselves working in small spaces and in open areas with room dividers separating offices. It is difficult to respect client confidentiality in such a context. In other instances, policies deny or limit service seemingly with the hope that clients will find work without assistance. While some limitations are understandable, there are instances where policies seem arbitrary.

In some respects, affirming the dignity of unemployed people runs counter to a general societal view of personal responsibility for all our life circumstances. Many people, including policy makers, have not accepted the changing nature of the labour market and the fact that unemployment is an unavoidable part of life for many people. There continues to be a tendency to equate unemployment with laziness or lack of ability. The vulnerability of people going through a period of unemployment has been well documented (Borgen and Amundson, 1987; Donohue and Patton, 1998). Being unemployed affects basic human needs such as the need for community, the need for meaning in life, the need for structure, and the need for emotional and financial security. While the impact of unemployment varies according to personal and contextual variables, there is little doubt about the ongoing need for affirmation.

Affirmation can come from many different sources — from family and friends, from others in a similar situation (an employment support group) or from an employment counsellor. Also, people seek affirmation in many ways, and the challenge is often to find the best ways to reach out to clients. Danielle Riverin-Simard (1998, 1999) suggests that personality can play a key role in determining the most effective intervention strategy. For some people, there is a willingness to engage in reflective exercises designed to enhance self-exploration and redefinition. Others are more action oriented and seek affirmation through involvement in productive activities (the cognitive and emotional reflection and reframing come later). Affirmation helps to define the client–counsellor relationship, as well as relationships with others.

Another way of looking at offering affirmation to others comes from the concept of "mattering." Mattering has been defined by Schlossberg et al. (1989: 21) as the "beliefs people have, whether right or wrong, that they matter to someone else, that they are the object of someone else's attention, and that others care about them and appreciate them." Mattering can be viewed at several different levels (Schlossberg et al., 1988).

- **Attention.** This primary level focusses on simply being recognized or noticed. It is an acknowledgment of our basic existence. The power of this level of mattering is demonstrated by reflecting on situations where it is taken away (i.e., being ignored).

- **Importance.** At this level, we feel acknowledged and people respond to us in ways that demonstrate their interest in what has happened in our lives. People take time to listen to our stories, our ideas and our feelings.

- **Dependence.** When we reach this level of mattering, we feel we are a contributing member of whatever is happening. Our active participation is expected and others are counting on our involvement.

- **Self-extension.** In this type of relationship, we believe others are personally interested in our successes and disappointments, and will make an effort to follow our progress.

The concept of mattering applies to all aspects of the unemployment experience and is an important concept in the setting of policy (Amundson, 1993). The first contact with an employment agency conveys a certain measure of mattering. Greetings, registration forms, waiting rooms, counselling offices and the speed of service, all play a part in letting people know they are more than "just a number." Unfortunately, these practical matters often are overlooked. One way to evaluate current practice is to think about how people would respond if an "important person" was visiting the counselling centre and compare that to the response provided to an "ordinary client." If we could view our clients with a similar sense of "importance," we would go a long way toward creating a counselling climate that "truly mattered."

Counsellors have the opportunity to enhance a sense of "mattering." In counselling, clients are encouraged to "tell their stories" fully, focussing not only on details, but also on their feelings and internal thought processes. Counsellors encourage this disclosure by being open and genuine in the relationship and by expressing empathy and unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1961). For many people, this may be the first time anyone listened carefully to them without critical comment. The client-centred relationship is designed to provide clients with a sense that they are highly valued (as a "person" as well as a "client") by the counsellor, and that every effort will be made to take their wishes into account when moving through all phases of the counselling process.

Of course, the counselling relationship is only one aspect of the equation. There must also be an alignment of expectations with respect to the tasks that will be performed. This intertwining of relationship with task contributes to what has been called the "working alliance" (Gelso and Carter, 1985) and is critical to the success of counselling.

Kelly (1997: 342), in reviewing the counselling process literature, draws the following conclusion:

> (a) therapeutic tasks and techniques occur effectively when implemented in conjunction with a significant (although not necessarily explicit) relational component, a component that probably conveys the counsellor's humanizing values and intentions, and (b) relational components find effective expression in tasks and techniques suited to the client's distinctive needs.

It is interesting to note that the relational aspect of counselling is not confined to the client-centred approach. All counselling has at its base some elements of relationship building, and these elements play a critical role in determining counselling effectiveness.

In recent years, considerable attention has been given to the development of computer tools for career counselling. The above discussion suggests that these tools will only be effective if they are embedded in a positive counselling relationship. Rather than replacing counsellors, computers should be viewed as a way to enhance the counselling process. Career policy should be consistent with this dual track of relationship and counselling tools.

Affirmation also needs to be addressed with respect to different social and cultural factors. Weinrach and Thomas (1998) propose a diversity-sensitive counselling approach that takes into account differences in age, culture, disability, education level, ethnicity, gender, language, residential location (i.e., urban, suburban, rural), socio-economic status and so on. In considering these differences, we must also be aware of the ways in which people are similar. Without this focus on similarity, we can fall prey to stereotyping and rigid policy formation.

As one example of how diversity plays itself out in actual practice, consider the issue of special programming for First Nations clients. While this seems appropriate at one level, it is not as simple as it initially might appear. There are many different First Nations groups, and within the groups there are differences of acculturation, rural versus urban perspectives, socio-economic status and so on. Developing appropriate policy for First Nations clients must reflect a broad level of sensitivity. Setting policy with this perspective requires both understanding and flexibility.

To conclude this section, I would like to address the issue of voluntary or involuntary participation in counselling (the mandated client). In recent years, I have worked with many mandated clients through *Starting Points* (Westwood et al., 1994) and have found that affirming the dignity of the person has particular relevance for this group. Clients who are mandated to come for counselling often are discouraged with the job search process and resentful of the "system." They may have been out of the work force for some time and lack self-confidence. Initial client–counsellor interactions can be particularly challenging, and it is here that affirmation efforts are particularly important. Counsellors dealing with mandated clients require extra support and training so they can be non-defensive, empathic, open about roles and responsibilities, and willing to "walk alongside" their clients (Amundson and Borgen, 1998). While you cannot force counselling on someone, many mandated clients have appreciated this extra effort and, in many instances, have become strong advocates of the counselling process.

Imagination, Creativity and Flexibility

Clients coming for career counselling often are facing a crisis of imagination. The problems they are confronting appear insurmountable and, in the face of these difficulties, clients feel "stuck." Under these circumstances, the counsellor is placed in the role of reframing agent: someone who might be able to help them "imagine" new possibilities. Solving problems, of course, may not entirely rest on imagination. In many instances, counsellors will need financial or program resources that they can utilize. What is important to recognize here is the linkage between financial or program resources and imagination.

The use of imagination in the counselling process is not reserved exclusively for the counsellor. It is essential that clients rekindle their imagination as well and become active partners in the process of reframing possibilities. Helping clients to bring into play their own imagination is an important part of the counselling process. The rekindling of imagination can occur in many different ways. Often, what is required is for clients to become less absorbed in the problem and more willing to step outside of traditional boundaries and look at their situation from new perspectives (Amundson, 1998). Involvement in some creative activities can be helpful to promote a more imaginative approach to problem solving.

It is interesting to examine the linkage between creativity and what regularly happens in counselling. Michalko (1998) studied the creative process of famous inventors and artists and identified some common themes.

- **Productivity**. The emphasis is on the generation of many different ideas using a non-judgmental approach.
- **Connecting ideas.** Playfulness and connecting ideas from seemingly unrelated fields are emphasized.
- **Tolerating ambivalence**. There is a willingness to consider seemingly contradictory ideas and to use "both-and" rather than "either-or" thinking.
- **Learning through metaphors.** An interest in metaphorical thinking is often reflected in activities such as doodling.
- **Taking action.** A willingness is expressed to take risks and confront traditional barriers.
- **Details**. There is an interest in small inconsistencies and a desire to make sense of the world.

- **Working collaboratively**. A willingness exists to work with others to generate information and ideas.

In considering these themes, it is not difficult to see how creativity could play a significant role in counselling. The role of creativity in counselling has been well documented by humanistic counselling psychologists for many years. Rogers (1962: 65-66), for example, states that "the mainspring of creativity appears to be the same tendency which we discover so deeply as the curative force in psychotherapy." Maslow (1962: 95) makes a similar observation after interviewing a number of different psychotherapists: "[P]sychotherapy may normally be expected to release creativeness which did not appear before psychotherapy took place." Creative expression is a significant aspect of counselling and sits alongside the other conditions of empathy, unconditional positive regard and genuineness.

Within the career counselling field, creativity seems to be playing an increasingly important role in current theory and practice. The work of Gelatt (1989), on a "positive uncertainty" approach to career decision making, is one example. Savickas (1997) makes some interesting connections as he addresses the role of spirit in career counselling. I have also tried to elaborate some creative ways of helping clients to resolve career problems (Amundson, 1998). Herr (1993 a, b) uses the phrase "personal flexibility" in discussing the infusion of creativity into decision making about life issues. He illustrates how personal flexibility brings together attitudes and skills consistent with life in a more dynamic society. Herr makes a compelling case for the importance of flexibility as a foundational principle for a new paradigm of career counselling, appropriate to the demands and challenges of the 21st century. The underlying point here is that career planning and decision making in a rapidly changing labour market require something other than a traditional linear approach. Creative problem solving is an obvious alternative.

The challenge for policy makers is how to set policy that supports creativity and personal flexibility, while still providing some structural guidelines. I think it is important to recognize that some structure must accompany creative expression. Creativity does not operate well in a vacuum. In terms of policy direction, there is a need for general guidelines, with allowances for variability and flexibility. In conjunction with a more flexible policy approach, there will be a need for a cadre of well-trained counsellors ready to take advantage of new possibilities. These counsellors will need to be comfortable with less structured counselling approaches and have the knowledge and self-confidence to use a wide range of intervention strategies. To attain this level of professional competency, there will be a need for focussed training consistent with this orientation along with ongoing professional development.

Concluding Comments

Linking career development and policy initiatives with career counselling process requires careful examination of a wide range of issues. In this paper, I have tried to highlight three domains that are of paramount importance in deriving this integration. The first domain concerns obtaining agreement on what exactly are the problems the client is experiencing. In defining problems, we need to look beyond our traditional points of entry to the actual needs and dynamics of situations. This requires a more client-centred holistic approach where some of the distinctions between personal and career issues blend together.

The second counselling process issue focusses on the need for affirmation of the dignity of the person. This is really a reminder of the basic operating principle underlying any social service. There is a certain vulnerability that comes with unemployment and, therefore, a need to focus affirmation efforts. In pursuing this goal, the uniqueness of each person must be respected.

The third issue addresses the need for imagination, creativity and flexibility in the counselling process. Within a context of social and economic upheaval, it is difficult for clients and counsellors to rely on many of the traditional methods of planning and decision making. There is an acute need for flexibility and new creative problem-solving methods. It is to this end that career counselling policy and practice must be directed.

I think it is time for a new adventure in career policy making to begin (Tocher, 1998). Many of the issues described in this paper have been minimized or overlooked in the setting of career policy. It is time to strike out on a new journey with the goal of achieving a better integration between policy and counselling process. In undertaking this journey, it is important to ensure a compatible infrastructure with well-trained career counsellors ready to provide feedback and to help guide policy development.

As indicated in the opening metaphor of this paper, there may be times when our journey will require us to walk in darkness. When I think of this, I recall the following poem by A.G. Ruffo (1996) as he reflects on the life of Grey Owl (Wa-sha-quon-asin).

HE WHO WALKS BY NIGHT
Because you must
    There's no one else
    You're the first
        The vanguard
You're the trail itself
Night is forever
It's a feeling
    vast as Lake Biscotasing
        high as a white pine
It's a moon that cares for you
Stars that escort you
Beasts that watch
    It's the edge
The private
At night the wind feigns sleep
    You hear the slightest stirring
        Everything is something else.
Everything is free
Anything can happen.

Walking in the darkness presents its challenges, but it also offers exciting rewards and new possibilities. This is a time for change, and we will not always be able to predict what lies ahead. We need to develop the confidence and the competence to reach out to new possibilities.

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